

NOL PUTNAM



FILE PHOTO BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

IN APPRECIATION

Rappahannock bids farewell to beloved artist-blacksmith

BY TIM CARRINGTON | *For Foothills Forum*

For half a century artist-blacksmith Nol Putnam transformed one of the Earth's hardest and most unyielding substances into flowing forms, such as leaves, stems, tendrils and seed pods.

His forge was loud, fiery and dangerous, and though he made his work seem plausible and ordinary, his mutations

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were nothing short of miraculous. James W. Shepherd, director of preservation at Washington National Cathedral, where Putnam's masterpiece Columbarium gates are installed, called it "magical" that "something so strong and hard can be shaped to be something so delicate."

Last year, the forge in Huntly was dismantled, the equipment sold to a younger artisan, and this year, Rappahannock's beloved blacksmith imitated art by becoming something else: His death on June 11, following a brief illness, turned the strong, sinewy iron worker into air and light, love and memory, connection and creativity.

Collectors, neighbors, old friends and new friends are mourning an irreplaceable presence in the county.

Putnam delivered part of himself to those who collected his sculptures. Dick Raines remembers the artist raising a glass to say that "one of the best parts of the project was getting to know Nancy and me." Raines adds: "This sounds self-serving but the point is that Nol had a deep interest in the people he worked with."

When the sculpture, named "West Wind," was moved, Putnam re-engaged and rechristened the work "Sirocco" or "southwest wind." Nancy Raines says that the piece will always be "Sirocco."

Putnam embodied the rare blend of artistic vision and an ever-expanding human connection. He could work in solitude for hours, and in minutes he could turn acquaintances into friends. Before taking up the anvil at 39, he taught history to teenagers at the Lenox School for Boys in the Berkshires. Some of his former students — now in their 70s — participated in regular Sunday afternoon email dialogues with Putnam.

Putnam's introduction to Rappahannock County came in 1976 at an arts fair. He liked the other artists, and soon settled in, buying land in 1991, constructing a house in 1995, and building his forge in 2001. The works in iron multiplied, but in parallel, so did a remarkable network of friendships with people of different ages and backgrounds.

"Our friendship grew during the pandemic when most every week, through every season, Nol drank coffee on my porch," recalls Miranda Hope. "He was so knowledgeable, a voracious reader of history, art, psychology. We talked about Black Lives Matter. We talked about loneliness. We talked about chickens. Wherever the conversation wanted to go, we went, as though following a thread out of a maze that we hoped to never exit, while, in the warmer months, my dog slept with her head on his dog's belly in the shade of the poplar tree. And so, for me, his greatest art and inspiration was how he lived his life."

As his friendships multiplied, so did commissions and inspirations. By 1980, he was selling sculptures and functional architectural pieces up and down the mid-Atlantic. In the mid-1980s, he began working on drawings for gates for Washington National Cathedral. A succession of commissions followed.



FILE PHOTOS BY LUKE CHRISTOPHER FOR FOOTHILLS FORUM

Nol Putnam at his Huntly forge in 2021. Among his many creations is a distinctive entrance gate on Tiger Valley Road (below).

Putnam's Folger Gate in the Cathedral Columbarium is filled with floral ornamentation. In a place where people are tucked in their final repose, the gate depicts an unstoppable beauty. Putnam could expand on the symbols of rebirth and continuity, but he deeply enjoyed the hard work of making such a statement in iron. He noted that the Folger Gate weighed 1,200 pounds and took 1,200 hours to assemble.

Putnam's forge was a must-see stop on the county's Fall Art Tour. Streams of visitors admired the iron sculptures and fixtures, but they were mesmerized by the live drama of seeing the artist-blacksmith light the fires and begin

hammering the iron bars into pleasing shapes from nature or imagination.

"Nol forged steel into art, and he also forged life into our community," said Matthew Black, president of the Rappahannock Association for Arts and Community. "My admiration for his presence, energy and talent is only matched by the loss I feel without him."



After stripping the forge, Putnam explored artistic avenues through drawing and writing — not so much about himself, but, as he liked to state it, the way "art is a basic component of the soul as we look out into the world." He also worked on planning a new house that would be simpler and safer for an 89-year-old.

In the winter, some balance problems set in, resulting in a temporary but painful injury from

a fall in his kitchen. Friends offered support, and he accepted it. His dog Jack, whom he claimed was part Alaskan husky, part wolf, was a constant companion. After his injury, Putnam said he was worried that Jack was becoming excessively worried about him.

The move to a simpler house never happened. In early June, Putnam sensed trouble and sought medical advice. A diagnostic trip to Charlottesville revealed signs of pneumonia but a more devastating report of Stage Four lung cancer. A rapid decline set in, and friends helped organize hospice support.

An artist's memoir remains only partly written. "The title of his book would be *Learning to Dance*, after a time as a boy when he danced with the sculptor Alexander Calder," says Mary-Sherman Willis. "Nol was a philosopher and a romantic, read widely and embraced people with an open heart and the soul of an artist. And he was a great dancer!"

Putnam leaves art made out of iron, plus art made out of living life as it should be lived. Miranda Hope sees it this way: "It just seemed that Nol woke up and got to the work of growing, learning, teaching, listening, reflecting, laughing, supporting, connecting, reaching, questioning, creating, and showing up, despite the forces to skip all that. Or maybe, because of them."



Putnam's Folger Gate in the National Cathedral Columbarium weighs 1,200 pounds and took 1,200 hours to assemble.

BY HENRY EASTWOOD, 1992



Bill Dietel

– catalyst, mentor, model –
leaves a rich legacy

BY PETE SMITH

BY TIM CARRINGTON | *For Foothills Forum*

Bill Dietel lived in the ripple effects he helped create.

As an educator, he sent thousands of young people into the world more convinced of their own capacities to live a fruitful life. As a philanthropist, he helped convert bank accounts into services and programs that made life better, at least for somebody. As a supporter of nonprofit organizations, he nudged fragile, well-meaning groups to mature, deliver something of value and convince generous friends to help them do it.

On Oct. 10, Dietel, at 96, died in his home at Over Jordan Farm in Flint Hill, and stories and impressions erupted across Rappahannock County, forming a portrait of a man who was a walking multiplier effect — less a structure than an energy source, less a noun than a verb.

One example captures the pattern: In the spring of 2021, Rappahannock's 7,100-acre Eldon Farms — a unique ecological asset — had languished for two years under a for-sale sign, with no committed buyer on the horizon. Dietel — ever the catalyst and matchmaker — approached Chuck Akre, who recalled Dietel's cut-to-the-chase style: "You have to buy it."

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Akre, who was stepping back from management responsibilities at the wildly successful Akre Capital Management, recalled his own reaction to Dietel's idea: "You're crazy."

But on June 30 that year, the Akre family bought the vast agglomeration of farms and woodlands for an undisclosed price understood to be more than \$50 million. Eldon Farms was secured from unwelcome development and partition, and Akre was launched on an unforeseen venture in conservation. "The reason we're in Eldon is Bill," Akre said.

Then there is Pete Smith, who met and instantly befriended Dietel about five years ago. Smith, formerly the chief executive of Watson Wyatt Worldwide, a global human resources consulting firm, found retirement un compelling and launched SmithPilot, Inc., which advises schools and nonprofit organizations. Dietel connected to Smith's work, but also to Smith himself, and he began to worry that his friend, approaching his late 70s, was having trouble letting go of his demanding work schedule.

Smith recalled Dietel asking, "Are you ever going to stop? What do you like doing that isn't work?" Smith pointed to his interest in photography, but time passed, and the intense worklife persisted. Then Dietel proposed a project: Smith would prepare a year of photographic images at the Dietel family's beloved Over Jordan Farm. "It took more and more of my time, and I really enjoyed it," Smith said. "At the end of 2022, I really cut the cord, doing virtually no client work after that date — in other words finally, really retiring." As for Dietel's role in the transition, Smith said, "He did it."

The education catalyst

Long before becoming a catalyst, Dietel discovered one in the power of education. In Rappahannock, he argued passionately for budgeting for the best education the Rappahannock County school system could deliver. Linda Dietel, his wife of 68 years, played a critical role in creating the Child Care and Learning Center and Headwaters Foundation, one of the first public education foundations in Virginia, serving as its first board chair.

Dietel grew up in the small-town slow lane of Churchville, N.Y. His father, son of a German immigrant, had a Depression-era medical practice, at times accepting food in lieu of payment from struggling patients. Dietel's formidable mother, whose father had immigrated from Italy, grasped the power of education and scrimped to send both Dietel and his younger brother, Jack, to Phillips Exeter Academy, followed by Princeton University. Bill went on to Yale University, earning a doctorate in English History, which took him to London, where he established a lifelong passion for almost everything British.

As Dietel remembered it, Phillips Exeter reset the trajectory. In a memoir he composed for his 11 grandchildren and six great grandchildren, he wrote,



BY JOHN MCCASLIN

Bill Dietel advocates for higher teacher salaries before a crowd of 150 at Rappahannock County Elementary School in 2018.

"In that period, doors opened for me into worlds I never suspected existed. I heard of people and places, of ideas and events, of human achievement utterly new in my experience."

Elite schools famously establish and reinforce networks, along with imparting knowledge. But more fundamentally, Dietel's Exeter experience gave birth to a worldview that British author and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips described in his book, "Going Sane": "It is sane to believe in, and live as if there are, good things and

good people who can help us live our lives."

For Dietel, that basic premise generated experiences that in turn gave him more confidence that doors could open and that he could walk through them. As Dietel tells it, in his last year at Princeton, he met "the girl of my dreams," the 16-year-old Linda Lyon Remington, headed for a Wellesley College education from a well-established Rochester family. A courtship followed, and four years later the two found themselves planning a life together. "Life was very good and the gods smiled on us," Dietel wrote in the family memoir.

In 1961, after teaching at the University of Massachusetts and Amherst College, Dietel became headmaster at the Emma Willard School in Troy, N.Y., America's oldest preparatory school for girls, and Linda's alma mater. In 1970, he moved to the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, becoming president in 1975, a role he held through 1987.

Learning of Dietel's death, the foundation issued an appreciation: "Few people outside the Rockefeller family have made an impact on the RBF as profound as Bill Dietel."

Linda Dietel finds Rappahannock

Life with the Rockefeller Foundation involved long hours, dinners and galas in New York. The

Dietels' eldest daughter Betsy, a Rappahannock resident, remembered that her mother "didn't like the hoopla of Manhattan," preferring sheep-raising at a farm the family owned in Richfield, Conn.

When Bill stepped down as president of the foundation in 1987, the Dietels began to explore their next chapter. A contact made through Colonial Williamsburg, one of dozens of organizations where Bill was a board member, led to an exploration of Rappahannock County, noted for its beauty and its aversion to haphazard development. A local banker owned a scenic parcel between Washington and Flint Hill, empty except for a lone shed which turned out to contain a log cabin. Linda sensed this would be their home, and Bill was willing to trust her intuition. The Dietels bought the land, eventually transforming it into today's Over Jordan Farm.

The farm's name is descriptive — the property is reached by crossing a small river named Jordan — but also symbolic, connecting with multiple Biblical references to a land of promise just beyond the river that borders the modern state of Israel. Though the Dietels weren't explicitly religious, the Remingtons were active Presbyterians, and Betsy Dietel figures that growing up, her mother would have sung a popular hymn that carries a refrain, "Over Jordan, Over Jordan, Yes, we'll rest our weary feet."

While Bill continued to advise friends and clients on philanthropic ventures, Linda built a presence in Rappahannock County, with education emerging as the



FROM THE ARCHIVES



The Rapp News recognized Bill and Linda Dietel as Citizens of the Year for 2007, citing the couple's "consummate

enthusiasm and dedication" to the community. Read the story by scanning the QR code or going to rappnews.link/a26



BY CLARE TURNER

Bill Dietel enjoying an afternoon with Jane Coon and other members of his 'Sherry Assembly' gatherings of widows and widowers.

The School of Aging Well

Bill Dietel's last educational project was an unannounced school on aging well. Dietel men – including Bill's father and brother – have died young, leaving Bill to trailblaze his way into his 90s as a widower. Dietel accepted the familiar catalog of old-age losses, always returning to the optimist's assertion of "nonetheless" – the farewells and fragilities pile up, but nonetheless, air gets breathed, paths get walked, friendships are made and renewed.

Though people in their mid-90s are often considered too old for new love or overseas travel, Dietel's last two years were brightened by both. Dietel didn't believe in accepting limitations unnecessarily.

At 95, Dietel surprised Cliff Miller III with a proposal to walk a 2.5 mile trail that looped around Turkey Mountain on Miller's Mount Vernon Farm. Though Miller doubted the wisdom of the outing, he got a surprise. "Damn if he didn't walk the whole thing!" Miller said.

Miller then told Dietel of another recently cut trail they might walk in the future. "What about tomorrow?" Dietel shot back, underscoring another old-age maxim: Don't delay. The second hike occurred the next day. "I'm going to miss the heck out of him," Miller confessed.

Taking a group to Saranac Lake where Linda Dietel's family had acquired a large Adirondack camp, Dietel asked his guests whether they were optimistic about America's future. Listing the litany of familiar woes ranging from blood-sport politics to climate chaos, the guests were broadly gloomy. Not Dietel, who went on to cite the country's emergence from Jim Crow segregation, vastly expanded opportunities for women, and advances in cancer treatments.

Clear about the risks associated with late-life isolation, Dietel formed The Sherry Assembly, with regular afternoon gatherings of three men and three women who live alone. "It was always an occasion," said Clare Turner, the widowed owner of Virginia Chutney. "Bill was the leader; he even made badges."

Dietel may have sensed a slowdown in recent months. He raised the prospect of moving to a senior residence that could provide more care over time. Dietel entered swift decline just after his daughter and son-in-law returned from a trip to the Republic of Georgia. Two days later, he went to bed at his cottage on Over Jordan Farm for the last time.

In dying, he delivered the community an uncharacteristic smack of grief. But one after another, his saddened friends have found themselves reliving a humorous episode or recapturing a gem of sage advice. It seems that Bill Dietel is still making people smile.

For his part, Dietel didn't sidestep the reality of dying one day. Living down the hill from his eldest daughter Betsy and her husband Mike Sands, he joined them for dinner every night, often closing with an instruction: "Just remember: If I'm not here tomorrow, don't be sad. It's been a great life."

➔ cornerstone interest. In addition to jump-starting the Child Care and Learning Center and Headwaters, she served on the advisory board for Lord Fairfax Community College, now the Laurel Ridge Community College. She also initiated the rehabilitation of the Scrabble School as a senior center.

Jane Bowling-Wilson, executive director of the Northern Piedmont Community Foundation, and before that, the director of the Headwaters Foundation, considers Linda and Bill Dietel the ideal mentors. Linda guided her in her early days at Headwaters, she said, while "Bill was always available, always accessible," ever convinced that good ideas could be funded. "He'd say, 'Go find the money. All you have to do is ask.'"

Virtually all of Rappahannock's nonprofit organizations have at some point drawn on Bill Dietel's mentoring prowess. "He wasn't an outlier; he was an out-performer," said John McCarthy, formerly Rappahannock's longtime administrator and currently senior adviser and director of strategic partnerships at the Piedmont Environmental Council. He added: "It's no tragedy to die in your 10th decade on the planet. It's still an enormous loss."

In 2007, Dietel, with his oldest and youngest daughters, created Dietel and Partners, a firm that continues to advise families who understand philanthropy as means for addressing societal problems that elude simple solutions.

In most communities, outsiders energetically advancing new ideas stir resistance as well as admiration.

Virtually all of Rappahannock's nonprofit organizations have at some point drawn on Bill Dietel's mentoring prowess.

In Rappahannock, no exception: yard signs extend a welcome to newcomers, while suggesting they clear out if they push too many ideas from their earlier lives. Dietel didn't take the jabs personally, and continued to push for causes, like quality education, that he believed would benefit the children of residents who tended to criticize his efforts.

Concerned about polarized

attitudes in the community, he helped spearhead the nonpartisan, nonprofit Foothills Forum, which early on carried out a countywide survey about local issues and priorities. For the past decade, Foothills has worked in partnership with the Rappahannock News to expand award-winning coverage of local issues through community support.



BY PETE SMITH

Dietel at his beloved Over Jordan Farm in Flint Hill.

Kevin Adams painted Rappahannock, a space he loved



MARY O'NEILL & N. LEWIS/NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Kevin Adams capturing nature during his 2017 residency in Shenandoah National Park.

BY **TIM CARRINGTON**
For Foothills Forum

Kevin Adams painted the real. He found it beautiful.

Born on Maryland's Eastern Shore, he traveled and looked, searching out the visual secrets of his subjects. Outside, at the easel, he would draw the contours, define the forms and establish the color relationships, focusing on whatever had captured his attention, before finishing the process in the

studio. In 2017, when he was an Artist in Residence in the Shenandoah National Park, Adams said that "each painting is like a short story, and I need to confirm that the plot is solid and that I can get to this particular story's ending on that canvas."

Kevin's own story found its ending on Oct. 17, four months after a diagnosis of advanced and irreversible brain cancer. He died at his Washington, Va., home with his family at his side.

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When an artist dies

When an artist dies, a lively stream of images and compositions comes to a halt. The distinct way that painter selected subjects, noticed shadows, or mixed colors goes missing. The only consolation is that appreciators can return to the canvases themselves, to stand where the painter once stood and imagine his or her silent choices of what to paint and how to paint it.

On Oct. 21, the scheduled Gay Street Gallery show of Adams' paintings, along with works of several guest artists, opened with an outpouring of Adams' friends and collectors. Two days after his spouse's death, attorney Jay Ward Brown was at the gallery to receive the works of the guest artists and arrange the show — frankly unsure he could manage the occasion without being overcome by the grief of the moment. "Kevin wouldn't want it canceled," Brown said, while admitting to a worry that people would find the occasion too painful to show up. As it turned out, collectors, neighbors and friends turned out, expressing fresh appreciation for Adams and his paintings, many buying one more landscape.

"Kevin was an empath," said Patrick O'Connell, chef proprietor of The Inn at Little Washington. "He could find a way to connect with anyone. He was a great listener and fully present in every conversation. Just being in his presence was therapeutic. He radiated a peaceful energy and wisdom beyond his years. With his art, he shared a window into his soul."

There was little the 64-year-old artist couldn't turn into a painting: hills rolling up against mountains, mountains massing against skies, barns enclosing inky interiors, boats with their curves and colors, piers resting in late afternoon water. Travel-based canvases might feature the geometries of New York City apartment blocks or a lone windmill in Holland. From 1980 till 1985, as a U.S. Marine Corps combat artist, Adams painted fighter planes and tanks. His solo exhibitions over the past 35 years span 11 states. In 1989, the Soviet Union invited him to a three-city tour, his paintings exhibited in Novosibirsk, Tomsk and Moscow.

Beloved landscapes

In recent years, Adams focused on two beloved settings — Rappahannock County and Cape Cod, Mass., with regular shows at the Gay Street Gallery he and Brown owned and managed together, and at a gallery in Provincetown. Painting in two radically distinct settings — rolling Blue Ridge farmlands and fog-layered Cape Cod edges — gave Adams the opportunity to put his versatility on full display, toggling back and forth between two geographies he understood deeply. "Kevin really wanted to know a place he painted," Brown said. "He wanted to paint places he loved."

Paula Amt, Adams' framer and



"Kevin just exuded joy in being in the park, painting and sharing his vision with others," said Jim Northrup, a Rappahannock resident, who served as superintendent of Shenandoah National Park.

"Forest Light," one of the many paintings Adams created during his Shenandoah residency.

close friend, remembered showing him images of farmland and barns in rural Pennsylvania. Adams agreed the scenes were pleasing, but said, "That's not my land, not my space." He never went there to paint.

Walking or driving around Rappahannock County, Kevin Adams knew when he was looking at a future Kevin Adams' painting. And before setting up a fresh canvas, he had to care about the scene. So the formula — if there were one — was love it, then paint it. And apart from Adams' technical mastery, the love was the

secret sauce that made many of his paintings irresistible to the collectors who bought them.

In "Fourth of July Sky," owned — and treasured — by Joanie and Robert Ballard, Adams competently paints two buildings, a gently rolling field and a fence, beneath a clear blue sky. It seems a deceptively simple picture. But the alchemy of the painting runs deeper: the blue sky is obviously made up of summer morning air; the yellowy green in the grass says it's getting warm, but not yet oppressively hot; two unthreatening clouds suggest

untroubled picnics, and a modest American flag on one of the houses signals a good mood, without any aggressive patriotic strutting. In the end, "Fourth of July Sky" is a moment of hopefulness as much as it is a Virginia landscape.

Beauty's enigma

Adams' landscapes carry no secrets, arguments or hidden meanings. They show the real world telling its own story, and the artist's gesture seldom draws attention away



“With his art, he shared a window into his soul.”

PATRICK O’CONNELL



Above: “Morning Filtered Light” Left: “Fourth of July Sky”

➔ from his subject. But standing in a room of paintings by Kevin Adams, it’s not difficult to discern the artist’s presence at the easel — calm, precise and appreciative of what he is painting. And when the walls are filled with images of the Blue Ridge and Cape Cod, it’s impossible not to realize how hard the man worked. He rose early and got to the studio without dawdling. He enjoyed breaks to the Eastern Shore or New York, but he tended to miss his studio and returned to it soon after unpacking his suitcase.

He wanted to do more than what he could already do well. “I just want to get better at this,” Joanie Ballard recalls him saying.

Adams was in some ways an outlier in a world where many contemporary works present conceptual puzzles, experimental materials and methods or raw protests. Adams admired the energies and edginess of today’s art, but he was set on finding and representing beauty. “Kevin generally painted things that brought him pleasure to see,” Brown said, “not always sunny and pretty, but in some way beautiful. He wanted people to experience joy and pleasure.”

Countering the growing perception that beauty was little more than visual pleasantries, Elaine Scarry, professor of aesthetics at Harvard University, makes a case for taking beauty seriously in her extended essay, “On Beauty and Being Fair.” She points out that Matisse “repeatedly said that he wanted to make paintings so serenely beautiful that when one came upon them, all problems would subside.” Matisse chose to remain in

France during World War II and was well aware of the suffering unfolding around him, but the paintings from this time are now cherished for their recumbent forms, serene lines and jubilant colors.

Scarry also insists that “beauty brings copies of itself into being.” Adams’ work would support that premise: Finding a landscape he found beautiful, he was led to reproduce that particular form of beauty, not simply depict the ridges and rocks that were in front of him.



Jay Brown and Kevin Adams at the capstone celebration of The Inn at Little Washington’s 40th anniversary in France.

2018 FILE PHOTO

Legacy of national parks

Prominent in Adams’ legacy are his paintings from the national parks, particularly the nearby Shenandoah National Park, where he regularly hiked and sketched, painting there in 2017 as part of the park’s Artist in Residence program.

“There is a very long history of a strong connection between the visual arts and the national park movement,

dating back to Thomas Moran’s famous paintings of Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, Yosemite and the Grand Teton,” said Jim Northrup, a National Park Service veteran, who served as superintendent of Shenandoah National Park and Cedar Creek and Belle Grove National Historical Park. “Kevin continued that tradition as one of the early Artists in Residence at Shenandoah. He loves the park, and that shows through his beautiful paintings. Kevin just exuded joy in being in the park, painting and sharing his vision with others.”

The Shenandoah experience yielded more than 40 finished paintings, plus notebooks and sketches. The paintings range from sweeping vistas to close-up compositions of rocks, flora and roots. Adams took his easel to other American parks as well. When the Grand Canyon National Park observed its 75th anniversary, Adams created a series of paintings of the inner gorge. In the same spirit, when Glacier National Park logged its 85th anniversary, he created a group of paintings of back-country landscapes there. The works were exhibited at the parks but also in Washington, D.C., at the U. S. Department of Interior Museum.

During the months of Adams’ illness, the front window of the Gay Street Gallery displayed a giclee print of a painting, “Morning Filtered Light.” The picture is filled with a skeletal barn, aged timbers splayed against a classic Rappahannock sky. The image and its title reveal one of Adams’ few secrets: the dying barn fills the space, but the true subject of the painting is the light that pours through it.